

# Keepers of the Flame

By GEORGE J. FLYNN

*Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us—and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill—constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities.*

—John F. Kennedy



Blast crater from vehicle-borne improvised explosive device that killed Cpl Jonathan T. Yale and LCpl Jordan Haerter, Ramadi, April 22, 2008

**A**s the sun rose over the town of Ramadi on April 22, 2008, Corporal Jonathan Yale and Lance Corporal Jordan Haerter watched a large truck approach their checkpoint. The truck should have slowed, but it accelerated despite warnings from the two Marines. Bystanders scattered in anticipation of danger, but the young Marines stood their ground and engaged the truck with no regard for their own safety. The truck rushing at Yale and Haerter blew up at the checkpoint, killing Haerter and mortally wounding Yale. Marines as far as 300 feet away were injured by the blast, which threw hunks of concrete through the air and left a hole 20 feet wide in the street.

As witnesses pointed out after the attack, it was these two Marines' courage and commitment to their mission that saved the lives of 50 Marines and an equal number of Iraqi police who were in the immediate area. Corporal Yale and Lance Corporal Haerter's decisive actions, unlimited courage in the face of extreme danger, and complete dedication to duty and their fellow Marines exemplified the fighting spirit shown daily by Marines in Iraq.

We all remember the similar terrorist attack against our Marines in Beirut. There, a suicide bomber crashed his truck through the Marine defenses and detonated a bomb that ripped through the barracks, killing 241 Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers.

However, because of Corporal Yale and Lance Corporal Haerter's decisive actions, the barracks in Ramadi were not bombed. The Marines in the compound were not killed. The bomber failed because Yale and Haerter stood their ground, fired only after issuing repeated warnings, and refused to let the assassin pass.

For over three decades, it has been our challenge to carry the torch passed to us by the standard bearers of the "Old Breed"—the generations of Marines who came before us. In the example set by Corporal Yale and Lance Corporal Haerter, we can see that the legacy has passed from one generation of Marines to the next.

Why did Corporal Yale and Lance Corporal Haerter stand their ground? In answering this question, we must examine the legacy of heroes who were compelled to do the *right thing* when it was the *hard thing* to do. Only when we discern the sense of obligation to the legacy that drives Marines will we understand why they are such remarkable keepers of the

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flame, and what we must do to help them carry the flame forward.

This article addresses the leadership challenges Marines face in today's Long War environment, and the enduring responsibility all Marines have to ensure that our Corps remains the Nation's expeditionary force in readiness and stays true to the Core Values of *honor, courage, and commitment*.

### Unchanging Principles

On today's battlefields, we believe that our values are more important than ever. This opinion is supported by reviewing the Army's Mental Health Assessment Team Four (MHAT IV) results. Because of the combat stresses our Marines face in Iraq and Afghanistan, we remain concerned about the possible decay of values and ethics since some Marines surveyed by MHAT IV indicated less than wholehearted commitment to treating noncombatants with dignity and respect. A small number even believed that all noncombatants should be treated as insurgents until proven otherwise.

As we send young men into battle, we subject them to the same awful circumstances faced by Marines in the World Wars, where men struggled to maintain a sense of humanity even while killing others. But that is what the American people expect of their warriors, and it is especially important on today's battlefields. Just as our friends trust in our steadfast devotion to right, our foes must fear the same.

Counterinsurgencies, by their nature, often blur the lines between friend and foe, but our values remain constant. Our enemy—who is not bound by proportionality and may kill without conscience—does not change who we are or what we believe in. For Marines, doing the right thing is the underlying, unchanging principle—a principle we reinforce through accountability and responsibility.

Accountability for a unit's performance rests with its leaders. Our commanders must create a command climate where Marines are given responsibility, challenged to demonstrate moral and physical courage, and held accountable for their actions. This focus and practice give us the ability to meet missions and overcome challenges, especially in combat.

Responsibility for an individual's actions rests with that individual. When Marines enter the operating forces, they know the right thing to do. The rigors of combat demand no less. Just as every Marine is a rifleman and has to keep his rifle clean,

every Marine also has a responsibility to keep his *honor* clean. But are we focused on keeping our honor clean? MHAT IV results indicated the need to do better.

### A Look Inward

In May 2007, we convened a Values and Ethics Working Group made up of Marines of all ranks from across the Corps and charged them to recommend measures for better instilling our Core Values in Marines. To inform the group's effort, we brought in recognized experts in leadership, ethics, behavioral science, and mental health.

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At the working group, a young captain offered a comment that illustrated the difficulty of targeting a time, place, and audience for ethics education. He cited two of his Marines—exemplary young men by his account—whose conduct under fire became the subject of investigation for ethical lapses. At the same time, another of his Marines, who entered the Corps under waivers for failure to meet enlistment criteria, has been nominated for the Navy Cross. In short, our ethical challenges *cannot* be associated with a readily identifiable “bottom 10 percent.”

This captain's point triggered important insights. First, the scope of our efforts could not be targeted at one group, but would instead be Corps-wide. Second, the all-impor-

tant effort made by drill instructors at recruit training should be viewed not as the culmination of the transformation from civilian into Marine, but as the beginning of a coordinated, continuous effort that must progress throughout a Marine's service.

A major in the working group asserted that the key to a strong Marine Corps is a sense of ownership in the Corps—being able to say, “This is *my* Corps now; let me show you what *I* do with it.” We agree wholeheartedly with the major. Ownership becomes possible only after recruits and officer candidates earn the title “Marine” and begin to live

by our values. Ownership is also central to our “strategic corporal” concept, which recognizes that the daily tactical decisions made by first-line leaders have strategic impact on the United States.



Cpl Jonathan T. Yale (above) and LCpl Jordan Haerter (right)

U.S. Marine Corps

The working group shed light on our most important issues, for which we remain grateful. Their work convinced us to look more deeply into ethical issues. We did so through two survey efforts, one focusing on the law of war (LOW), and the other more broadly on leadership and ethics. We also realized the need for some direct collaboration between Headquarters Marine Corps and our first-line leaders.

**Law of War Survey.** Our Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned canvassed over 1,600 Marines of various ranks from around the Service to determine their understanding of LOW issues. Each Marine answered 12 basic questions and 13 grade-specific questions, developed by Marine Corps judge advocates. The latter questions focused more on policy as rank increased.

We are happy, but not a bit surprised, to report that Marines “get it”—from the oldest to the youngest. General James Mattis provides a great example of a LOW-trained Marine in action when he describes a foreign journalist’s experience with Marines under Mattis’ command in Iraq. The journalist came to General Mattis thinking Marines were all “Rambos” but left with a different opinion:

*Very close to us was a young Marine, down on one knee, watching an alley. There was shouting and shooting down one street, and we stayed back from that. . . . I eventually talked to this young [Marine], and he was 19 years old.*

*All of a sudden, [the journalist] looks over and plastered up against the wall is a big [woman] in a burqua . . . holding the hand of a little boy about knee high to a duck. All this shooting is going on, and they’re both obviously very scared. The Marine waved at the little*

*kid, who didn’t wave back, and then there was more shooting. A guy came running down the alley, and [the journalist] said that he turned to shoot back down the alley. As he got down to shoot, the Marine shot him, once in the shoulder, once in the head, dropping him right there not 15 feet away.*

*The Marine edged up to the little kid and handed him a piece of candy that he dug out of his pocket. . . . [The little boy] unwrapped it and stuck it in his mouth, and now he waved to the Marine, who went back on his knee watching over his buddies.*

*The Marine motioned to the lady that she could move on. The correspondent told me, that as far as she could see that kid walking, he would turn around to wave at the Marine, who had just done the worst thing you could ever do in front of a child, and no matter what that little kid is ever told, he is going to remember the Marine who gave him that piece of candy and waved. Now, think what that says about a 19-year-old who could discriminate.<sup>1</sup>*

General Mattis was extremely proud of that Marine.

**Leadership and Ethics Survey.** In the fall of 2007, Marine Corps University’s John A. Lejeune Leadership Institute (LLI) traveled to units around the Corps to conduct a leadership and ethics survey. The same survey has since been administered to a representative group of noncommissioned officers (NCOs) at the Russell Leadership Conference. It has also been administered at the request of our Recruit Training Depot commanders and the commanders of deploying battalions.

As was true with the LOW survey, the results were heartening. These young men

and women have taken their Service’s values on board. They take responsibility for their own actions, display trust in their chain of command, and refuse to tolerate unethical practices among fellow Marines.

As always, there is work to do. As we all know, Marines take their oath of office seriously, but they are also intensely loyal to one another. The survey asked, “If you believe torture is being used to obtain information that could save the lives of captured Marines, would you report it?” Their responses varied and in many cases indicated uncertainty, which we anticipated because the scenario was an unpleasant one.

But the answer was not complex, and we need to arm Marines to see the difference between answers that are complex and answers that are easy to understand, but hard to accept. Our Marines need to be loyal to one another and to the Corps, but their greatest loyalty must be to the Constitution and the principles that undergird it. The American public expects no less from keepers of the flame.

*we are happy, but not a bit surprised, to report that Marines “get it”*

U.S. Marine Corps (Brandon R. Holgersen)



**The Marine Corps uses training such as the Corporals Course to prepare noncommissioned officers to take charge in a variety of stressful situations**

The enthusiastic response from participants helped us chart the course for leadership development. We gathered unvarnished opinion and recommendations from NCOs, gave leading-edge instruction to our first-line warfighters, and provoked thoughts on issues that we hope will yield a group of leaders who mature more quickly in their roles as keepers of the flame.

## To Hold the Torch High

We had our work cut out for us. We learned that our efforts would begin on the day our recruits first stood on the yellow footprints at Recruit Training Depots and would continue through the duration of their service. We learned that our target audience would be every man and woman in the Corps today. Our effort needs the traction and clarity that come from relevance, and our Marines need to take ownership if our success is to last.

**Changes to Entry-level Training.** In the 1990s, at Marine Corps Recruit Depots Parris Island, South Carolina, and San Diego, California, we introduced the Crucible. The Crucible subjects recruits to 54 hours of physical and mental rigors made more difficult by the deprivation of food and sleep. As the culminating trial of recruit training, the Crucible requires individuals to make decisions and take actions based on the honor, courage, and commitment that bind individual Marines into a Corps.

We have now added even more depth to the effort behind transformation. We began with the single most critical factor in the development of a basic Marine—the Drill Instructor (DI). We adjusted DI training, anchoring the DI leadership role in representing and instilling Core Values in the recruits. We adjusted our recruit training sequence by increasing the length of values training from 14 to over 40 hours. With this time, we tasked the DI to introduce the values to recruits in a formal setting, to discuss them during “footlocker talk” seminars, and reinforce them daily by example. Symbolically, the DI participates in the Crucible alongside recruits as an exemplar of honor, courage, and commitment. By weaving values instruction throughout recruit training, the DI provides recruits with the basis for more thorough recognition and acceptance of Core Values than ever before.

We exported these methods to our other entry level training organizations. We added 11 hours to combat instructors’ discussion time during Marine combat training at our schools of infantry. We have built a parallel program at

officer candidate school and the basic school, and these focus on the lieutenant as both a reinforcer of values and a values-based leader.

These first formative days in a Marine’s service are profoundly important. We have seen it on the faces of recruits as they receive their well-earned Eagle, Globe, and Anchor emblems following the Crucible. For the first time, DIs address these young men and women not as recruits, but as Marines. As they grasp the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor in their palms, these new Marines also accept as their own the legacy of the Corps and our values of honor, courage, and commitment. We allow few people to observe this bellwether moment, but the transformation is palpable. Our most recent efforts promise to make the transformation steadier, more extensive, and more beneficial to the Marine, the Corps, and the Nation.

**Values-based Training.** While the specifics of Core Values training are best suited to Recruit Training Depots and other formal educational settings, values-based training (VBT) is a larger construct that can be delivered in a variety of formal and informal settings throughout the Corps. VBT describes the method by which we thread our values throughout a Marine’s career. It encompasses the foundational aspects of the training and education continuum that prepares Marines to make ethical and moral decisions over their careers and throughout their lifetimes.

VBT design required a comprehensive review and alignment of instruction, policy, and leadership doctrine in order to produce Marines whose actions in combat, garrison, and society are firmly guided by honor, courage, and commitment. To implement VBT, we instituted extensive changes in our schools. Training and Education Command is formalizing the development of VBT skills at officer candidate school, the basic school, and all of our enlisted professional military education courses (corporal courses, sergeant courses, staff NCO academies, and first sergeant courses). At each course, the instruction will be tailored to meet the demands of leadership for the Marines in attendance.

VBT is intended for implementation in less structured environments as well. The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) represents one of our earliest and finest examples of VBT in action. As MCMAP instructors throughout the Corps teach hand-to-hand combat techniques, they also inculcate principles of the use of force and restraint. More importantly, the instructors discuss the

linkage between these principles and our Core Values in order to bring an everyday context to honor, courage, and commitment, and they do it across the Corps at the small unit level.

In the same manner that our Recruit Training Depots now implement Core Values training in a more continuous, comprehensive manner, VBT promises to do the same throughout the individual Marine’s service. As a result, Marines will benefit from the explicit reinforcement of values that have been implicitly promoted throughout the Corps’ history.

The American public holds high expectations of its Marines, both in combat and at home. In this, we must remain aware of the great trust and responsibilities placed on us and periodically reassess our fidelity to them.

Our most recent assessment of the situation drives us to solutions that are, for Marines, time-honored. We depend on our warfighters, especially our NCOs, for good advice on how to succeed. Their answers are basic but are not to be taken for granted. Responsibility, accountability, and ownership were words we heard again and again as we “took the pulse.” As we serve with this latest generation of Marines, it is our obligation to ever employ them as strategic corporals—they deserve this single standard.

The colors have been passed to a new generation, one worthy of the title Marine and of our past legacy. The men and women of today’s Corps stand shoulder to shoulder with those who have gone before with a proud and deserved reputation of honorable and heroic service to the Nation. At all levels of the Corps, these leaders are truly keepers of the flame. Through our continuous dedication to our Core Values and focus on our warrior ethos, we will ensure that the flame continues to burn brightly into America’s future. **JFQ**

This article was prepared with the assistance of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Parkyn, USMC, Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> James N. Mattis, “Ethical Challenges in Contemporary Conflict: The Afghanistan and Iraq Cases,” lecture delivered at the U.S. Naval Academy, n.d., available at <[www.usna.edu/Ethics/Publications/MattisPg1-28\\_Final.pdf](http://www.usna.edu/Ethics/Publications/MattisPg1-28_Final.pdf)>.